

The Southeastern Librarian

Volume 59 | Issue 1

Article 10

Spring 2011

Book Review: Race and the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition of 1895

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Recommended Citation

Sicignano, Charles (2011) "Book Review: Race and the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition of 1895," *The Southeastern Librarian*: Vol. 59 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln/vol59/iss1/10>

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Race and the Atlanta Cotton States Exposition of 1895. Perdue, Theda. University of Georgia Press, 2010. 182 pages. ISBN-10 0-8203-3402-2 (ISBN-13 978-0-8203-3402-8). \$26.95

Thirty years after the Civil War, the United States was still working its way through reconciliation and an economic healing. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the American South, where there were extreme differences between rich and poor and written and unwritten rules of segregation and racial politics. But by 1895, Atlanta had established itself as the South's capital city. With the infrastructure for a robust economy already in place, including a modern sewer system, local and regional rail lines and the Georgia School of Technology (now referred to as Georgia Tech), Atlanta had all of the pieces necessary for serious growth. All it needed was a showcase for what it could offer.

Atlanta was also a center for black progress; Atlanta had a black working middle and upper class, as well as a slate of higher education options that sought to prove that blacks could compete with whites academically and intellectually. These educated professionals were also looking for something in order to showcase what they were capable of, if given a level playing field and a fair chance. It was out of this need that the Cotton States Expo of 1895 was born.

Perdue traces the entire history of the Expo- from Atlanta business leaders generating local support to the federal government appropriating the necessary funds to the various booths at the Expo. Atlanta's Cotton Expo was a way for the town (and the entire region) to do something about the racial stigma that was still hanging over its head. A proactive effort to promote racial conciliation and economic diversity was needed in order to attract northern capital. Atlanta finally got the chance to show how it could compete in the global market going into the 20th century.

The first day of the Expo was a historic day in itself. Booker T. Washington delivered his "*Atlanta Compromise*" speech, and scholars have been debating whether this was a call for racial harmony or a concession to the policies of segregation ever since. Notable black leaders emerge as the story unfolds, as well as information regarding previous expos and the racial policies of other cities and states. Perdue's research indicates that if a city's location was outside of the American South it did not mean that the racial attitudes were any different. Race was just as much a complex issue in 1895 as it is today, and Perdue brings these complexities to light with thoughtful insight.

The book is broken up into three sections: Beyond the Atlanta Compromise, Vanishing Indians, and The Global South. "Beyond the Atlanta Compromise" concentrates on the issues of the time and the build up to the Expo, and assesses what came out of the expo from a racial standpoint. "Vanishing Indians" concentrates on the participation and influence of Native Americans on the Expo, as they dealt with their own issues of prejudice in the post-Civil War South. "The Global South" delves into the economic issues of the time and how Atlanta might fit more into the global economy. With so much territory on the coast, and with such a network of railways, the Expo, along with changes in tariff legislation, was an opportunity to promote the entire South as a port that was open for business.

Overall, this is an interesting snapshot of southern history when white southerners were willing to deal the growing influence of the black population as long as it meant economic benefits for everyone. Unfortunately, the year after the Expo, *Plessy v. Ferguson* became the law of the land, and that ultimately gave white southerners the legislative foundation to implement the Jim Crow laws that would haunt the South for decades to come.

Recommended for academic libraries, especially those who have programs that focus on Southern history and African-American studies.

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